

# **The Loss of Civility**

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Have we lost our motivation to treat others with respect and civility? Is incivility becoming the norm for our society? Do we learn civility as a child? And what happens when we don't? What happens when those who are in power create models of incivility with their words and behavior?

Examples of incivility can be found in almost every sphere of life - in the halls of Congress where intolerance takes the place of earnest dialogue, to the youth soccer and ball parks filled with anxious parents who sometimes become belligerent toward referees, opposing coaches, and even the young players themselves. Incivility is displayed in loud cell phone use by strangers in public places, at schools where bullying is pervasive, and on the roads, where road rage maims and kills.

Examples of incivility are especially available on the Web, where many people check their inhibitions at the digital door. Are you aware of the website, [JustRage.com](http://JustRage.com), where users are encouraged to express their angry feelings?

The following is one recent JustRage posting (which I have edited for this service).

“To the \_\_\_ school busses that get in my \_\_\_ way to work (or any place for that matter), please run off into a ditch and explode. Seriously, you are simply IN THE WAY. These \_\_\_ buses make multiple stops to pick up or drop off kids, and take their precious \_\_\_ time doing it! And why the \_\_\_ can't I just pass you? That tiny \_\_\_ stop sign on the side of the bus couldn't stop me.”

The list of rants go on and on. Whether or not there is an historical increase in incivility or just a greater ability to quickly share it through our social media, we do seem to be developing a greater tolerance for incivility. With daily - almost hourly - expressions of rudeness, anger, and violence in our society, is it any wonder that we often attempt to numb ourselves to this onslaught of behavior?

The following is a reader's response to the Editor of the *New York Times* (October 2013):

**To the Editor:**

“We, as a culture — from children to adults, in both public and private — have grown coarser and cruder in tone.

It's not that human nature has changed; we have simply become more transparent. The advent of digital communication has allowed us to engage in hostility where facial reactions and emotional responses are missing. Hostile messaging, abrupt e-mails, and caustic online posts and reviews have normalized an uglier and

less empathic side of human behavior — and colored our politics and entertainment as well. Witness the humiliations routinely showcased on reality TV, the snarls of call-in shows and the acidic tone of popular blogs.”

It has been suggested that in our technologically focused society, we are more competent when dealing with machines and software but have lost ground when it comes to dealing with each other.

While current political incivility is reported with overwhelming regularity, it is certainly not difficult to find historical examples:

During the presidential election of 1800, a newspaper, the *Connecticut Courant*, issued a dire warning about the consequences of a Thomas Jefferson victory in the presidential election: “Murder, robbery, rape, adultery and incest will be openly taught and practiced....The soil will be soaked with blood.” Thomas Jefferson sued this newspaper for libel - but lost.

“In the 1828 presidential election, John Quincy Adams was called "the Pimp" by Andrew Jackson's campaign. Adams' supporters fired back with a pamphlet calling Jackson's mother a "common prostitute." - Richard Riehl

Or the allegation in 1884 that Grover Cleveland had had an affair with a young widow and fathered an illegitimate child. - Daniel Shea and Morris Fiorina, *Can We Talk? The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics*.

Over twenty years ago, in 1996, during a debate over the budget on the Senate floor, Democratic Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia said:

“Mr. President, can't we rein in our tongues and lower our voices and speak to each other and about each other in a more civil fashion? I can disagree with another Senator. I have done so many times in this Chamber. I can state that he is mistaken in his facts; I can state that he is in error. I can do all these things without assaulting his character by calling him a liar, by saying that he lies. Have CIVILITY and common courtesy and reasonableness taken leave of this Chamber? Surely the individual vocabularies of Members of this body have not deteriorated to the point that we can only express ourselves in such crude and coarse and offensive language.”

### Can we make a difference?

Now, I want to shift from a focus on the all-too-frequent political incivility that leaves me, and perhaps you, feeling helpless and even hopeless.

Can we make a difference in our own behavior and, in so doing, contribute to the need for greater civility in our world? Can we make a difference on a local level? I would guess that most of us here this morning would argue that we, ourselves, are rarely boorish, uncaring, or rude to others. But when we look at some common examples of

incivility, we may see ourselves in a different light. Some of the most common examples of incivility include:

Cutting in Lines

Blocking the Aisles in Grocery Stores

Cutting Off Others in Traffic

Not Using a Turn Signal

Driving Slow in the Passing Lane

Littering

Improper Cell Phone Use

Taking and Misusing Handicapped Parking Spots

Taking Credit for the Work of Others

Treating Store Employees or Waitstaff Rudely

Attacking someone's character who has disagreed with you

Other examples.....?

### Example 1

"I was in my local post office sending off mail. There was a fairly long line of people ahead of me. Less than five minutes later, a man walks in talking on his cell phone talking loudly in a very animated tone. I was not the only

person who was disturbed by his insensitive behavior. This was evident in the way many people were looking and glancing at one another. His conversation continued on and got louder. When he finally left the post office, a sigh of relief came over everyone present.”

## Example 2

“I found myself running into a coworker as I entered my workplace. I held the door open for him/her and the coworker breezed through without saying thank you. When I got to the break room to have a morning cup of coffee, I found that the pot was empty—the last person did not refill the coffeemaker. Later, my coworkers all left for lunch together while I was in the restroom. To top off my day, I received an email from my supervisor, demanding that I finish a project—in the next two hours!

## Example 3

On a Wednesday morning at 10:00 a.m., half of the PSY 101 introductory psychology students are in their seats. The instructor, a woman in her early 30s, begins class on time. Fifteen students stagger into the lecture hall between 2 and 20 minutes late. One student sitting near the side wall is sleeping. The student next to him is reading the newspaper. Several students in two different groups are discussing their weekend plans, despite the instructor’s impatient stares and pauses in the lecture. Ten students

are text-messaging on their cell phones. Twenty students have laptops that are open to Facebook or email. Four students leave between 5 and 10 minutes early, while the professor is still speaking. Other students pack their backpacks so that they are ready to leave five minutes before the end of class.

### What is civility?

Civility is more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. Civility is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point to discuss differences, and listening past one's own preconceptions. Of course, it is much easier to be civil to others when they are acting with civility toward you. But it is important to remember that civility requires an awareness of how your behavior may be affecting others and what your intentions may be as you express your behavior.

"Civility is a construct that the Greco-Roman culture passed on to Western civilization. In Latin, it meant "city," in the sense of a city-state. Consequently, "civilitas" - which became "civility" in English - was the conduct expected from citizens in good standing, citizens who were willing to give of themselves for the good of the city.

A possible definition of civility for our times would suggest that the civil person is someone who cares for his or her community and who looks at others with a benevolent

disposition rooted in the belief that the claim of others to well-being and happiness is as valid as his or her own.

### Why is the expression of civility crucial to our society?

Many Americans strongly believe that a vigorous civility is necessary for the survival of society as we know it.

In his book, *The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends On It*, author Os Guinness argues that civility needs to be rebuilt in western societies, such as the USA, if these societies are to survive: "Civility must not be confused with niceness and mere etiquette or dismissed as squeamishness about differences. In a world torn apart by religious and secular extremism, no question is more urgent than how we live with our deepest differences."

"Civility means a great deal more than just being nice to one another. It is complex and encompasses learning how to connect successfully and live well with others, developing thoughtfulness, and fostering effective self-expression and communication. Civility includes courtesy, politeness, mutual respect, fairness, good manners, as well as a matter of good health." – Pier Massimo Forni, author of *Choosing Civility*.

Health studies have shown that prolonged exposure to stress caused by living in an uncivil environment increases the chances of developing cardiovascular disease and the American Psychological Association has estimated that workplace stress (considering absenteeism, loss of

productivity, medical expenses and turnover) costs U.S. businesses about \$300 billion a year.

In contrast, when we engage in a civil and pleasant exchange with a friend, our bodies can release neurochemicals such as serotonin that lower our stress levels, make us feel better and strengthen both our immune system and our social bonds with that friend. The bottom line? The harmonious relationships that civility helps foster have a positive impact on our overall well-being.

Civil communication begins early. The more that we allow incivility to infiltrate our culture, the more we may become dangerously indifferent to its existence and pass it down to the next generation. Many Americans agree that there should be civility training at school and at work. Perhaps a national public education program starting in the schools, cities and public squares across America could turn the tide on incivility and help restore respect and pride as a country.

Quote:

"When once the forms of civility are violated, there remains little hope of return to kindness or decency."

– Samuel Johnson